

Introduction

In the fall of 1962, the United States and the Soviet Union came as close as they ever would to global nuclear war. Hoping to correct what he saw as a strategic imbalance with the United States, Soviet Premier Nikita S. Khrushchev began secretly deploying medium range ballistic missiles (MRBM) and intermediate range ballistic missiles (IRBM) to Fidel Castro's Cuba. Once operational, these nuclear-armed weapons could have been fired against cities and military targets in most of the continental United States. Before this happened, however, U.S. intelligence discovered Khrushchev's brash maneuver. In what became known as the Cuban Missile Crisis, President John F. Kennedy and an alerted and aroused American government, armed forces, and public compelled the Soviets to remove from Cuba not only their missiles but all of their offensive weapons.

The U.S. Navy played a pivotal role in this crisis, demonstrating the critical importance of naval forces to national defense. The Navy's operations were in keeping with its strategic doctrine, which is as valid today as it was in late 1962. The Navy, in cooperation with the other U.S. armed forces and with America's allies, employed

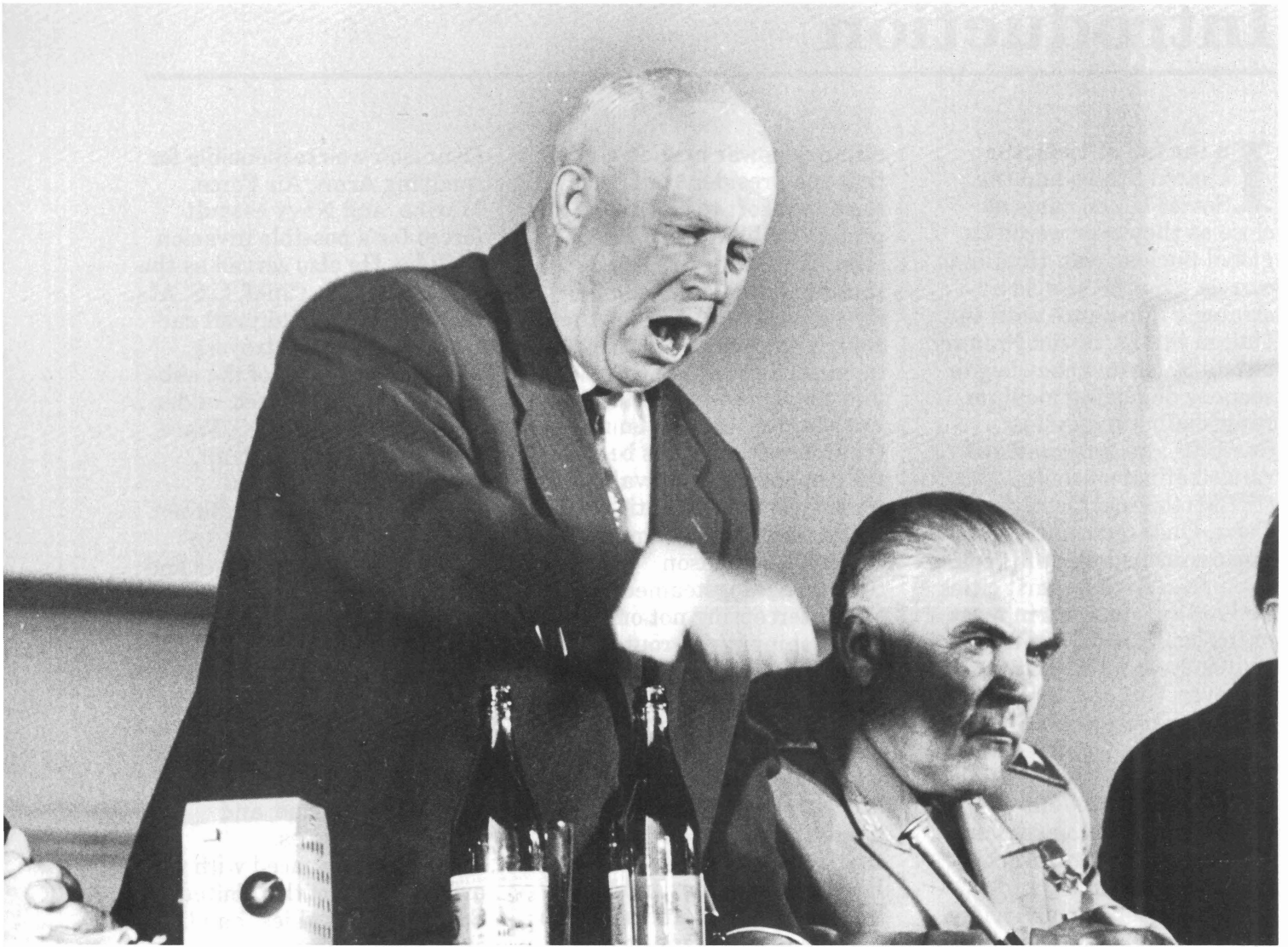
military power in such a way that the president did not have to resort to war to protect vital Western interests. Khrushchev realized that his missile and bomber forces were no match for the Navy's powerful Polaris ballistic missile-firing submarines and the Air Force's land-based nuclear delivery systems once these American arms became fully operational. Naval forces under the U.S. Atlantic Command, headed by Admiral Robert L. Dennison (CINCLANT), steamed out to sea, intercepting not only merchant shipping en route to Cuba, but Soviet submarines operating in the area as well. U.S. destroyers and frigates, kept on station through under-way replenishment by oilers and stores ships, maintained a month-long naval "quarantine" of the island of Cuba. Radar picket ships supported by Navy fighters and airborne early warning planes assisted the U.S. Air Force's Air Defense Command in preparing to defend American airspace from Soviet and Cuban forces. Navy aerial photographic and patrol aircraft played a vital part not only in observing the deployment of Soviet offensive weapons into Cuba but monitoring their withdrawal by sea.

As the unified commander for the Caribbean, Admiral

Dennison was responsible for readying Army, Air Force, Marine, and Navy assault forces for a possible invasion of Cuba. He also served as the Commander in Chief, U.S. Atlantic Fleet. The aircraft carriers, cruisers, destroyers, and Marine forces of the subordinate Second Fleet, under Vice Admiral Alfred G. Ward, were poised to launch air, naval gunfire, and amphibious strikes from the sea against Soviet and Cuban forces ashore. With speed and efficiency, other fleet units reinforced the Marine garrison at Guantanamo on Cuba's southeastern tip and evacuated American civilians. Dennison also coordinated the maritime support operations carried out by Canadian, British, Argentine, and Venezuelan forces.

Khrushchev, faced with the armed might of the United States and its allies, had little choice but to find some way out of the difficult situation in which he had placed himself and his country. President Kennedy did not press the advantage that the strength of U.S. and allied naval and military forces gave him. Thus, the Soviet leader was able to peacefully disengage his nation from this most serious of Cold War confrontations.

U.S.-Soviet Conflict in the



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The Cuban Missile Crisis was one in a long series of incidents in the global confrontation between Communists and anti-Communists in what came to be known as the Cold War. Relations between the Soviet Union and the United States, allies against the Axis powers

in World War II, were generally hostile during the late 1940s and 1950s. The Soviet Union of dictator Joseph Stalin and his successors forced the nations of eastern Europe to establish Communist governments and supported insurgency movements in the eastern Mediterranean

Soviet Premier Nikita S. Khrushchev emphasizes a point by striking a table during a Paris press conference in May 1960. An impetuous and volatile man, Khrushchev deployed Soviet offensive missiles into Cuba without carefully considering the likelihood that the United States would discover the ploy and respond by threatening war. Seated next to Khrushchev is Marshal Rodion Malinovsky, the Soviet Defense Minister.

and in Asia.

The United States, a power with global responsibilities after the war, responded to these Soviet actions by

Cold War

strengthening threatened nations with economic assistance, like that embodied in the Marshall Plan for western Europe. In addition, Washington sponsored military assistance to and alliances with anti-Communist governments as part of a global "Containment Strategy" intended to prevent the spread of Soviet power and communist ideology.

Serious clashes of interest between the United States and the Soviet Union occurred over Berlin in 1948, China in 1949, Korea in the early 1950s, Laos in the late 1950s, and Berlin again at the end of the decade. The Soviets supported Chinese, Korean, and Vietnamese Communist guerrillas and conventional military forces fighting against the U.S. and other non-Communist governments. The Soviets killed few Americans themselves, but because Moscow was the power behind international communism and the patron of anti-American action around the globe, U.S. leaders regarded the USSR as their prime antagonist. Moscow, however, refrained from posing a direct military challenge to Washington and worked to prevent the outbreak of large-scale warfare between Soviet client states and the West.

A major reason for this Soviet restraint was the overwhelming superiority of the United States in nuclear weaponry. In the 1950s, the U.S. Air Force's Strategic Air

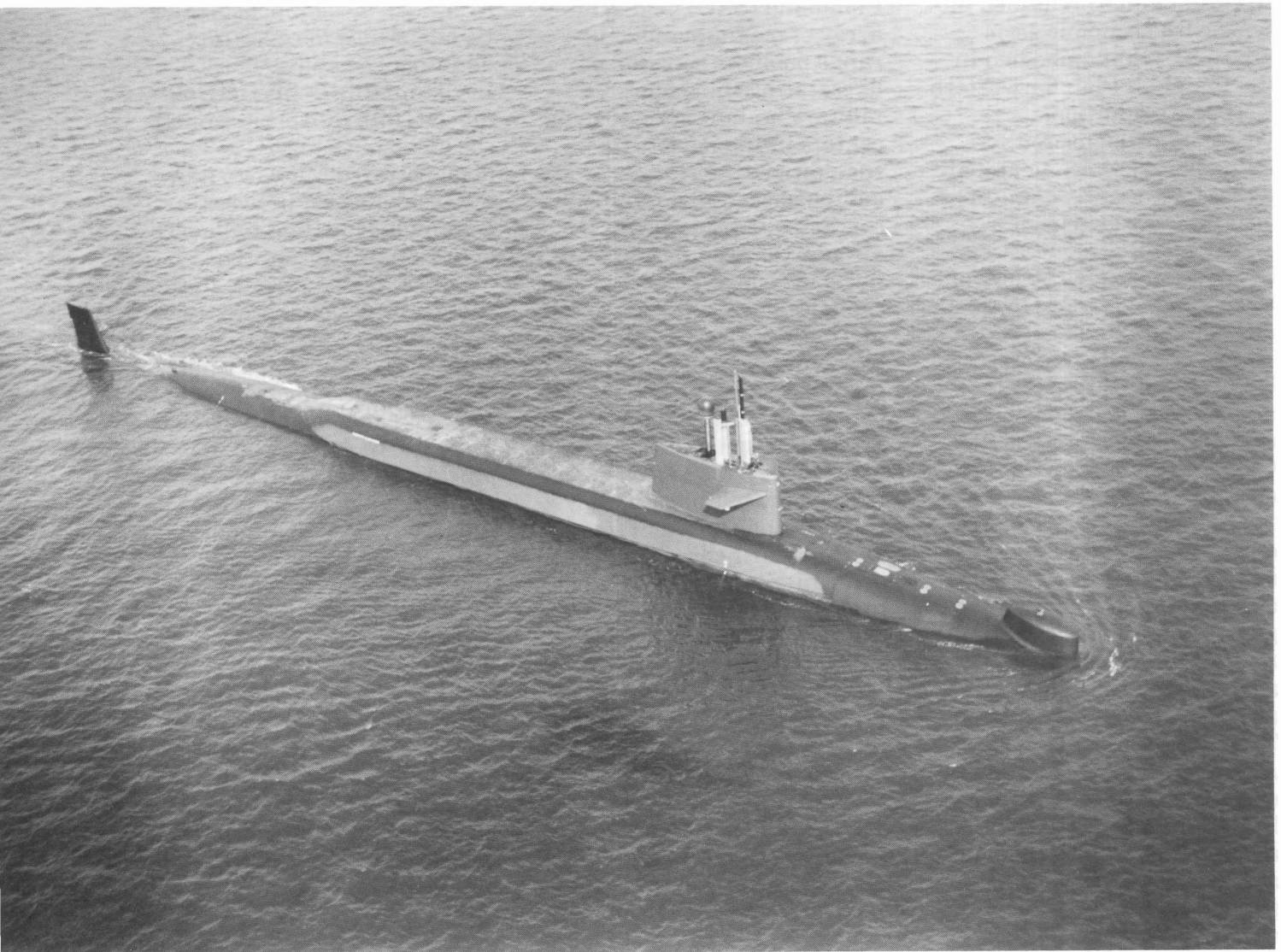
Command (SAC) fielded an array of medium and long-range bombers capable of devastating the major military and urban/industrial centers in the Soviet Union. In addition, the Navy equipped several dozen Navy carrier squadrons with aircraft that could drop nuclear bombs. The Navy also commissioned several submarines that carried the surface-launched, nuclear-armed Regulus cruise missile. At the end of the decade, the United States brought on line nuclear-armed intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM) based in the United States and submarine launched ballistic missiles (SLBM) taken to sea in the Navy's new *George Washington*-class ships. In addition, with the concurrence of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies, the United States deployed IRBMs to Great Britain, Italy, and Turkey. The power of the U.S. nuclear arsenal was tremendous. An American nuclear attack, to quote a Navy officer recounting a SAC briefing on the nuclear strike plan, would have left "virtually all of Russia . . . a smoking, radiating ruin at the end of two hours."

Throughout the late 1950s, Khrushchev's government devoted enormous Soviet resources to the development of a nuclear arsenal and by 1960 operated a fleet of long and medium-range bombers, and a few ICBMs. The Soviet Navy also developed several submarines to carry short-

range, surface-launched ballistic and cruise missiles. In addition, the ability of a Soviet missile to lift the *Sputnik* satellite into orbit around the globe in October 1957 demonstrated Moscow's growing technological prowess. Lacking adequate intelligence of Soviet strength in these strategic systems, some in the American national security establishment worried that the United States no longer held the edge in the nuclear realm. The issue took on national prominence during the presidential election of 1960 when many Americans became convinced of a "missile gap" between the United States and the USSR.

Even though this issue helped Senator John F. Kennedy defeat Vice-President Richard M. Nixon, soon after his inauguration in January 1961, the new president learned from intelligence sources that the United States had far more nuclear weapon delivery systems and warheads than the Soviets. This conclusion was based on the earlier surveillance missions of high-flying U-2 reconnaissance aircraft and the continuing orbits of American intelligence-collection satellites over the Soviet Union. Furthermore, the Soviets based their ICBMs and long-range bombers only in the USSR, far from most key targets in the continental United States.

On 21 October 1961, Assistant Secretary of Defense Roswell L. Gilpatric made a



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speech proclaiming that the only “missile gap” which existed was in favor of the United States. Gilpatric informed the world that the U.S. nuclear arsenal was so destructive that any nation bringing “it into play” would be committing “an act of self-destruction.” Khrushchev knew the true balance of power, but to have it revealed

in a threatening public statement was, he felt, a personal and political affront.

Hoping to recover from this setback, and change the power equation in favor of the USSR, Khrushchev began extensive discussions with Fidel Castro, the leader of another country at odds with the United States. By the spring of 1962, the Soviet premier

Thomas Edison (SSBN 610) underway in the Atlantic in 1962. This submarine and her sisters of the *Ethan Allen*-class each carried 16 Polaris ballistic missiles and were a key component of the U.S. strategic deterrent force.

had succeeded in establishing close relations with Castro. These improved ties eventually resulted in the Cuban Missile Crisis.